

NAVY MEDICINE LIVE

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Come September Morning

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(NO COMMENTS)

By Steven Van Der Werff, BUMED Public Affairs



On a sunny, Tuesday morning I arrived at work. It was September 11, 2001, a little after 9:00 a.m. (U.S. Photo by Photographers Mate 2nd Class Lisa Borges)

Author's note: For 21 years, first as a photographer and then retiring as a Chief Mass Communication Specialist I had the unique privilege of telling the Navy story; call it being a paid tourist. The past five years I've done the same as a civilian and in June my good fortune continued when I started at BUMED to tell Navy Medicine's story. For more than a quarter century I've heard, and told quite a few sea stories, some a bit embellished from the actual truth, this however is my true and personal account of 911.

My decision to join the Navy was solely based on my sense of adventure.


The Navy's ad from my childhood, "It's not just a job it's an adventure," truly struck home, envisioning myself a bell-bottomed, Dixie-cup wearing Sailor right out of the movie "Mr. Roberts".


The years flew by, suffering salty shellbacks on board a nuclear powered aircraft carrier, combat camera tours, a thorough POW interrogation at SERE School, discovering my inner Quentin


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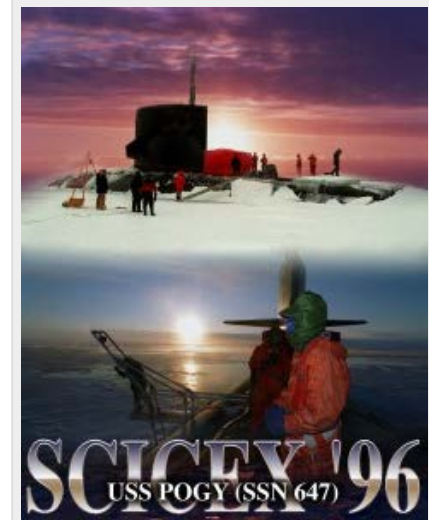


I envisioned myself a bell-bottomed, Dixie-cup wearing Sailor right out of the movie “Mr. Roberts.” (Courtesy of Navy Recruiting Command)

Tarantino at Syracuse University’s Military Motion Arts School, a science expedition to the North Pole on board a nuclear fast attack submarine; forever grateful to the boat’s very patient IDC Corpsman who helped me acclimate to life inside the narrow and suffocating steel shark, and pulling max G’s as backseat photographer for the Blue Angels.

The ad had come true I was operating on maximum overdrive and I was high on adrenaline. It wasn’t just a job it was indeed an adventure. Little did I know that I had yet to experience the adventure of a lifetime, one that was life altering, made me grow-up and fully realize what a privilege it is to serve my country as a member of the United States Navy.

After discrediting the Air Force team, that I and the team’s “Baby Doc” smugly referred to as “Thunder Chicken”, by being the best military flight demonstration team in the world I was detailed to the Pentagon. I had heatedly disagreed with my detailer’s decision to send me deep inside the beltway. Taking a Secretary of Defense staff assignment at the Joint Combat Camera Center (JCCC) didn’t exactly register very high on my fun meter. Driving a desk, assisting with Com Cam policy and receiving imagery from forward deployed DoD combat camera teams wasn’t exactly how I had ever



The boat’s very patient IDC Corpsman helped me acclimate to life inside the suffocating and narrow steel shark.
(U.S. Navy photos by Photographer’s Mate 2nd Class Steven Van Der Werff)

envisioned myself.

Dammit, didn’t he know I was an operator! My blood boiled the likelihood or remote possibility of running into something in DC fun or adventurous like, thumb-wrestling Bolivian Blow Dart Peddlers, fire walking with Tahitian Mai Tai Jugglers, or trading 35mm film for Vitamin M (Motrin) with Desert Storm



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hardened FMF Corpsmen or better yet the Greatest of All Time (GOAT) MRE – Pork and Rice with BBQ Sauce, would be slimmer than an ice block’s chance on a hot afternoon in Twentynine Palms.

Taking a Secretary of Defense staff assignment at the Joint Combat Camera Center didn’t exactly register very high on my fun meter. (U.S Navy photo by PH1 Charles Alley)

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I pleaded for cockpit time in a fast-mover. Thankfully, while with the Blues, Baby Doc #2 had given me the three P’s brief: Power Puking Prevention.

How 'bout breaking through the polar cap in a steel skinned sub? OK then, maybe something more cerebral like hitting far-off beaches, photographing K-Bar brandishing Marines; I had always been a devotee of that sort of action. He repeatedly said NO to my request to be back in the action at the tip of the spear, explaining that I should have become an FMF corpsman if I wanted to be with Devil Dogs so badly – Ooh rah!



Baby Doc #2 had given me the three P’s brief: Power Puking Prevention. (U.S. Navy photo by Photographer’s Mate 1st Class Steven Van Der Werff)

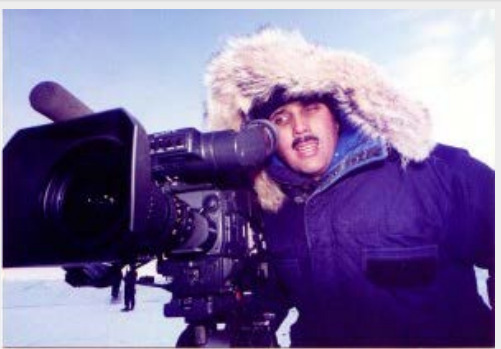
Then he soft sold me on how my leadership ability and corporate knowledge was needed at HQ, darnnit he had me hooked. And so braying like a big dumb wounded elk I surrendered and agreed to drive a desk and assist forward deployed combat cameramen.

On a hot muggy day in August 2001 I checked in. The Pentagon buzzed like a beehive. I was impressed by all of the military’s, “Heavy Hitters” walking the P’ways. I had a lot to learn, especially working with the other service branches. I would not however share

my thoughts about the Thunder Birds with my Air Force boss.

What was there not to like? The world appeared to be at peace and I was stationed in our nation’s capitol.

I had a large office pooka, a computer with a super-fast T-line connection, and the great rejuvenator, Starbucks was conveniently located one deck below. Best of all, I would be home every night for the next three years to annoy my wife and kids – oh joy. My first month flew by moving JCCC into the Pentagon’s newly renovated wing.



Braying like a big dumb wounded elk I surrendered, and agreed to drive a desk and assist forward deployed combat cameramen. (U.S. Navy photo by ST2 Danial Bergman)

On a sunny Tuesday morning I arrived at work. It was September 11, 2001, a little after 9:00 a.m. My wife, was flying back home that day from attending a family matter in the mid-west. I was getting in late because I had dropped my kids off at school; playing the role of soccer mom somewhat new to me. JCCC’s OIC was attending a conference in Norfolk, and the Operations Chief was at a meeting in Alexandria.

When I entered the office the entire staff was huddled around the TV watching CNN report that a plane had crashed into one of New York’s Twin Towers. Like the others, I was absolutely dumbfounded when a second jet followed. Soon after, a large boom and shudder shook the building. My co-workers and I looked at each other not sure of what had just occurred. “That sure seemed like one helluva sonic-boom I thought to myself.” Having come from the “Blues” my mind still operated in the aviation world of thinking.



What was there not to like? The world appeared to be at peace, and I was stationed in our nation’s capitol. (Official DoD photo)

The phone rang. It was an Air Force JCCC staff member, off for the day, across the Anacostia River at his home on Bolling Air Force Base. He asked me if we had just been bombed. I said I wasn’t sure, there were no alarms going off. He said he thought so because from his back yard he saw black smoke pouring out of the Pentagon. Someone went to investigate. They quickly returned, saying, “We gotta go.”

Smoke filled halls were chock-full with people making their way towards exits. The murmur of voices and shuffling feet was all that could be heard. No one had a clue to what had just happened. The idea of a passenger plane hijacked by terrorists crashing into the Pentagon was as remote a possibility as the Terminator becoming the governor of California. Not having a clue to what had happened I made my way outside.

Once outside I saw thick black smoke rising. Hordes of the dazed and confused poured into the daylight. I raced over to my car to listen to the news. I sat stunned not believing what I heard. Holy-moley I thought. “We’ve been attacked by terrorists, same as the Twin Towers. My God there are people in the wreckage.”

I spend my entire career looking for action and when I think I’m tucked away in the rear with the gear the action comes straight to me. Sirens approached in the distance. Then it hit me that my wife was flying home that day. My mind raced with morbid fear. Is she safe? Has she got on the plane yet? In a fog I made my way to the pre-determined rally point. Once there I set my personal emotions aside. Personnel had to be mustered and accounted for.

Then security officers were shouting for everybody to leave the area because another attack was imminent. Mass hysteria enveloped the crowd.

We scattered like cockroaches running for cover, ending up on the other side of Highway 395. I knew I wouldn’t be seeing my car for a long time. Worries clouded my mind, thinking of how I’d get home, who would pick-up and care for my kids and would my wife’s plane be hijacked? The second attack turned out to be a false alarm, so I set aside my worries, and focused on the positive. My wife would be OK and I would figure out how to get home and



The idea of a passenger plane hijacked by terrorists crashing into the Pentagon was as remote a possibility as the Terminator becoming the governor of California. (USCG photo by Telfair H. Brown)

take care of my children, but first I had my military duty to fulfill.

Before the metro shut down we were able to hop on and get to American Forces Information Services (AFIS) in Alexandria and set up a temporary JCCC. There was imagery to get out to the world. The story needed to be told.



We scattered like cockroaches running for cover, ending up on the other side of Highway 395.
(Photo by Mark Faram)

I tried repeatedly, but couldn't reach my wife. I was scared. Fortunately I was able to contact a neighbor who could pick my kids up from school. Once at AFIS we went into action – still and video imagery started to come in, Sec Def wanted his imagery. Hours later after repeated attempts I finally got a hold of my wife. She was safe. Her plane had been delayed because of the tragedy. She had spent her time desperately trying to get a hold of me, fearing for the worst – widow hood. I assured her that I was un-harmed and that the kids were safe. We cried for our good fortune and the mis-fortune of others. I thanked God for watching

over me and my family.

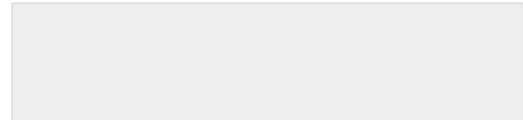
After processing the day's events it struck me that I had been less than a hundred yards from the crash site. Late that night in the safety of my home with my kids snug in bed I realized that a week earlier before moving into the newly renovated wing, JCCC had been located in the area of impact and that myself and a few other co-workers would have been in the old office that morning to make sure everything had been moved, but had not because we had been watching the Twin Towers tragedy unfold. I sighed with relief. It had been a close call.

Years later, thinking about that bleak morning in September when all of America held its breath and our enemies cheered I give pause to reflect. Understanding, that on that day something awoke in me that had been missing in me, if not many others – service, dedication and sacrifice. I had spent my time in the Navy up until then thinking of what I could take or get out of the deal. My training, my many deployments, my wanting fun and adventure had always been about me.



It struck me that I had been less than a hundred yards from the crash site. (Official DoD photo)

Sure, I had always been a good Sailor, but I had been driven by hubris and selfish desire, not giving much thought to what it really meant to serve my country. I was happy as long as I was able to do my job, do Sailor stuff, snap photos, edit video, write stories, collect a paycheck, deploy, liberty, drink beer and return in one piece to my family. It didn't happen overnight, but over the course of my tour at the Pentagon supporting the "Global War on Terror" I found a newly found sense of purpose and energy.



I worked long hours, determined to support the cause and add meaning to my duty. Gone were my days of



thinking that being a Sailor meant being a sea going pirate, swashbuckling across the globe, with tall tales to spin and tell. People had died and would continue to do so without mine and every American’s full support to stop our enemies. After I completed my tour at the Pentagon I unhesitatingly requested my detailer to return me to the fleet on a ship, haze gray and away, with Honor, Courage and

Commitment forever etched into my heart and soul.

The war on terrorism continues as does my Navy service, albeit as a civilian, but when my time serving comes to a close I will be able to say as President Kennedy so eloquently said, “I can imagine no more rewarding a career. And any man who may be asked in this century what he did to make his life worthwhile, I think can respond with a good deal of pride and satisfaction:

“I served in the United States Navy”



I can imagine no more rewarding a career than serving in the United States Navy. (U.S. Navy photo by AE1 Karen Marini)

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